Child Abuse and Moral Reform in England


As recently as 1880 English parents could mistreat their children with virtual impunity, for while statutes prohibited cruelty to animals, children in the home enjoyed no such protection. Children were considered the chattel of their parents, and interference with parental treatment of children was considered tantamount to an attack on private property.

This book analyzes the actions of certain voluntary organizations, notably the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, in the battle against child abuse and neglect in England between 1870 and 1908. Because the NSPCC confronted a social ideology that held the family to be beyond the purview of state regulation, it sought to reshape public opinion as well as to police parental behavior. In pursing these twin goals, the NSPCC popularized the modern idea that there should be explicit limits on parental power, and secured passage of the first legislation designed to protect children in their own homes. Beyond shedding light on pressure group techniques and politics, this study helps to clarify Victorian attitudes toward poverty, the family, social class, and state interference.

Winner of the Pacific Coast AHA prize for best first book

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Status of Research or Work: Completed/published

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